

# The Right Use of Christian Liberty

1 Corinthians 10:23-33

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First Corinthians 10:23-33. Let me begin by giving you a short introduction to the subject of Christian liberty, and then we'll look at the context for 1 Corinthians 10. Then I'll read our passage for you, and we'll get into it.

We had an extended study of the subject of Christian liberty a few years ago when we worked our way through Galatians. Paul's entire epistle to the Galatians is a defense of Christian liberty, because liberty is the necessary corollary to the doctrine of justification by faith, which is the very heart of the gospel. That doctrine was under attack by some very determined false teachers in the Galatian churches. Paul was waging war against their legalism. So a very powerful affirmation of Christian liberty runs through the book of Galatians.

Both the gospel and the law emphatically agree about one vital truth: *Salvation is not something any sinner could ever earn or deserve. You cannot earn a place in heaven by any amount of your own good works, legal obedience, religious ceremony, or works of charity.* Our attempts to earn favor with God are useless, because the very best things we do are all flawed and worthless in the eyes of a perfectly holy God. Everything we do is tainted with guilt, because we have sinned. We are *already* guilty. We can't meet the standard of perfection God requires. Furthermore, even the very best deeds we do are corrupted with wrong motives, pride, self-righteousness, the notion that we have somehow acquired a measure of personal glory, or whatever.

No matter who you are, Scripture says, at your very best, you are still a sinner who falls far short of the glory of God. Isaiah 64:6: "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Romans 3:10: "As it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one.'" God's righteousness is so much higher than ours that by our own good works and efforts at spiritual self-reform we could never rise from a fallen and condemned position to earn a right standing before God. His standard is clear. In Matthew 5:20, Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now the Pharisees were the most fastidious legalists who ever walked the planet, constantly attentive to the minutiae of the law--so much so that they missed the law's larger message. Still, on the outside, they were by far the most disciplined and meticulous religious order that ever tried to follow the law of Moses. But Jesus said you would have to attain a righteousness even greater than theirs in order to enter heaven. Just how close to perfect would we have to be in order to earn redemption? The biblical answer is that "close" simply isn't good enough. In the final verse of that same chapter, Matthew 5, Jesus spelled out exactly what he meant: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Now it should be self-evident that it is a moral impossibility for anyone who has already sinned to attain that level of perfection, and since (according to Romans 3:23 "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," it would seem we are all in a hopeless condition, right?

That's exactly right, by the way. Left to ourselves, we would have no hope of salvation. But God didn't leave us to ourselves. He sent his Son, who died to pay in full the price of our guilt--and what's more, Jesus obeyed the whole law, perfectly, without a single breach of any commandment. First Peter 2:22: "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth." Hebrews 4:15: "In every respect [he was] tempted as we are, yet without sin." Hebrews 7:26, after an entire lifetime under the law, Jesus was declared to be "Holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." Even in his full humanity, he was sinless--perfectly righteous. And His perfect righteousness is imputed to all who believe. Second Corinthians 5:21: God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In the same way our guilt was imputed to him so that he could pay its price in full, his righteousness is imputed to those who believe and are united with him by faith. That is the only way under sun you can get the perfect righteousness that's required if you want to see the kingdom of God.

What it means is that the whole law has already been fulfilled on our behalf. We are freed from the law's threat of eternal condemnation. We are released from the yoke of all the ceremonial commandments, rituals, and symbols that were loaded into the Mosaic Covenant that foreshadowed Christ. Those things were types and figures and object lessons--mere shadows (foreshadowings) of Christ. And now that we have the substance of the New Covenant, we don't need to observe the shadowy rituals of the Old Covenant. Colossians 2:16-17: "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. [He's talking about all the ritual and symbolic elements of Moses' law, and he says, ]These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." The moral lessons imbedded in Moses' law still reveal what righteousness entails. It's still a sin to blaspheme, or lie, or murder, or covet, or dishonor your parents.

When Scripture says we "are not under the law, but under grace," it doesn't mean we are relieved of all moral duty, of course. But it *does* mean that we've been delivered out from under the law's sentence of condemnation, unfettered from the bondage of the law's threats and judgments and punishments. Best of all, we are totally emancipated from the certain doom the law pronounced against us. We are also therefore free from the rigors of legal ceremony established in the Mosaic covenant. The Christian life is a life of forgiveness and liberty--the exact opposite of life under the law. The curse of the law, the ceremonies of the law, and the final condemnation of the law have been removed by Christ. In the words of Romans 7:4, we "have died to the law through the body of Christ." Our spiritual union with him is a complete union: it unites us with his death and resurrection, so that we are in essence dead to the law.

There's another, equally important, sense in which we have been liberated. We are now free from the bondage of sin. We're not only dead to the law, we are dead to sin.

Romans 6:9-12:

Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

10 For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.

11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions

And just two verses later you have that famous passage where Paul says, "You are not under law but under grace." But in context, he is not saying, "therefore you can ignore the moral principles taught by the law. His point is precisely the opposite. It's about freedom from sin, not merely emancipation from the law. Listen to the whole verse: "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." And a few verses later, he says, "having been set free from sin, [you] have become slaves of righteousness."

So Christian liberty involves those two aspects: freedom from the yoke of the law, and freedom from the bondage of sin. When Paul says in Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery," the context reveals that he has both aspects of liberty in mind. *Don't go back under the law; that's the sin of legalism. And don't retreat into the bondage of sin; that's the error of licentiousness.*

The command "Stand firm[!]" is military language. It implies that Christian liberty is something that must be guarded. Stand fast in it. Fight for it if necessary. Don't let anyone or anything rob you of your that freedom in Christ. Don't be in bondage to the law, and don't be in captivity to sin.

As I said, that was the whole theme of Galatians. There Paul was writing to a group of churches that were threatened by the error of the Judaizers, and his emphasis was on urging them to *defend* their liberty.

Here in 1 Corinthians, however, Paul is addressing a different set of problems. This was a church with all kinds of problems. They were abusing the concept of Christian Liberty.

They had taken the idea of liberty to such an extreme that their worship services were utterly chaotic. People were getting drunk on the communion wine. They were competing with each other to see who could manifest the most spectacular spiritual gifts. They would try to outdo each other speaking in tongues and prophesying, and praying aloud, until their meetings had become a chaos of noise and confusion.

They were splitting up in little groups that claimed to be followers of Paul, and Apollos--and then there was the super-spiritual group who claimed they were just followers of Christ. These groups couldn't get along and were feuding between

themselves. People were bringing lawsuits against one another before secular judges. They even had a man in their midst who was engaged in an incestuous affair with his own father's wife, and they tolerated it. Not only did they *tolerate* it; but Paul said they were *proud* of it (1 Corinthians 5:2): "You are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you." He calls for the excommunication of a man who was living in gross sexual sin, a variety of incest that even the sexually liberated pagans in a debauched city like Corinth found shocking! And the Corinthian believers were congratulating one another for their tolerance and diversity!

They had taken the idea of liberty to a ridiculous extreme and were abusing it-- "turn[ing] the grace of our God into licentiousness." So Paul actually spends several chapters in this epistle discussing Christian liberty and its implications.

He's doing this in the context of answering a question they had evidently sent him by courier. They had asked him if it is legal to eat meat that had been offered to idols.

See, Corinth was filled with pagan temples, and worshipers at these temples would slaughter animal sacrifices to make their offerings. A portion of the meat was offered as a burnt offering, but normally most of the animal remained unburnt. But the *whole* animal was deemed offered to idols, and the pagan priests could keep whatever was not burnt. Same thing with offerings of produce. Fruits and vegetables were collected from the altar and became the possession of the priests. That's how priests were paid.

And these pagan priests could turn that produce and those slaughtered animals into cash by reselling them. The meat would go to cut-rate butcher shops, and the produce to a special stall at the farmer's market. Food sold from pagan offerings was usually less expensive and yet it was often more fresh than the meat or produce you could get at the Corinthian Costco stores. So there were some practical advantages to buying meat that had been offered to idols.

But there was a debate in the Corinthian church about whether Christian liberty extended to an issue like eating meat that had been offered on pagan altars. So they wrote and asked Paul to give them an apostolic ruling on the question.

He responded by telling them (1 Corinthians 8:4) that "'an idol has no real existence,' and that 'there is no God but one,'" so they were essentially free to eat even the meat that had been offered to idols. There was no inherent sin in it. As Jesus taught in Matthew 15, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person . . . whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone." And by extension of simple logic, eating a bowl of fruit that some profane person had put on a pagan altar can't in and of itself contaminate you spiritually, because the God that idol is supposed to represent doesn't even exist.

By the way, Mark's gospel (chapter 7, verses 18-19) quotes that same statement ("Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled."), and then Mark adds this editorial comment, making Jesus' intention clear: "Thus he declared all foods clean." When Jesus said that, he was

formally releasing his followers from all the Old Testament dietary laws. All foods were now clean--including food that has been offered to idols. That's the first point Paul makes in answering Corinthians' confusion about what they could eat and what was forbidden. No food is forbidden. We have total liberty when it comes to what we eat. No mere food can defile us spiritually. Jesus himself said so.

But then Paul went on for several chapters to warn them against the danger of using their liberty in a way that hurts others. Chapter 8, verse 9: "But take care that this [liberty] of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." Their use of their own spiritual freedom was not to be selfish, but always in consideration of others. Paul said, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." (v. 13). That's the last verse of chapter 8, and the entire theme of chapter 9 is how Paul gave up various aspects of His own personal liberty for the sake of the gospel, becoming all things to all men that he might by all means save some. Notice the context there, by the way. He's talking about going to extremes to avoid offense, even to the point where he is willing to forego personal rights. He's not talking about getting tattooed and pierced or adopting crude language in order to fit in with the rebels in Roman culture. He's not talking about following fashion so he can blend in with Greek hipsters. He is talking about yielding personal rights that belong to him under the principle of Christian liberty so that he doesn't cause any unnecessary offense.

In chapter 10, his theme is still Christian liberty and how to use it responsibly. He reminds them of Old Testament Israel, and how they fell into idolatry through a combination of overconfidence and carelessness and worldliness. There he is making it plain that his approval of eating meat offered to idols does not constitute approval of idolatry itself. In fact, he tells them in verse 14, "flee from idolatry." In those first 22 verses of chapter 10 he is reminding them that things such as idolatry, immorality, and complaining against God are not matters of Christian liberty; they are outright sins.

That's important to understand, leading up to verse 23, because when he says in verse 23, "All things are lawful," we can be certain he is not including under "all things" the things he had just condemned as sinful.

But the expression "all things" must be read in its proper context, and the context here has to do with food, and specifically food offered to idols. Notice that Paul had first raised that subject in chapter 8, verse 1. In chapter 9 and the first half of chapter 10 he moved away from the specific question about meat offered to idols, but everything he says in those chapters is directly related to the right use of Christian liberty. And here in chapter 10 he returns to their question about meat offered to idols.

And the passage we are about to look at is a kind of summary of everything he has said since the beginning of chapter 8. He is summing up. He is reiterating the principles he wants them to take away from the discussion. He is underscoring the importance of using their liberty in the right way. They had pretty much exhausted all the *wrong* uses of Christian liberty. Here Paul reminds them of the *right* uses.

Now let me read this passage, 1 Corinthians 10:23-33. And as I read, please pay attention to the point the apostle Paul is making. Remember, he is speaking here about the right use of Christian liberty. See if you can identify the main principles as I read.

"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up.

24 Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

26 For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof."

27 If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

28 But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience--

29 I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?

30 If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

32 Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,

33 just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

Again, that whole passage is focused on the right use of Christian liberty. Remember that he is writing to people who are prone to be selfish and to abuse their liberty for selfish ends. And so he gives them three principles that will correct their tendency to abuse that liberty.

You want to use your liberty in Christ for the right ends? Here's three ways to do it. I'll give you all three principles, and then we'll look at them one at a time: 1. Use your liberty *for the good of others*. 2. Use your liberty *for the growth of the gospel*. 3. Use your liberty *for the glory of God*. I'll repeat those as we cover them. First, he says,

#### 1. USE YOUR LIBERTY FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS

Paul writes, "'All things are lawful,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor."

When the apostle Paul was writing Galatians, he was defending the gospel against a very dangerous legalistic heresy, and that's why he urged the Galatians to defend their liberty at all costs.

Here, however, the apostle Paul seems to suggest to the Corinthians that there is a time when it is appropriate to forego the exercise of their liberty for the good of others.

See, when you have heretics and foes of Christian liberty are false teachers or heretics--whose teaching is actually a threat to the fundamental truths of the gospel--don't yield an inch; don't give up your liberty. Stand fast in it. No concessions are to be made when there is an attack on the gospel.

But here in 1 Corinthians, Paul's concern was entirely different. People who had weak consciences were being confused and enticed into violating their consciences by loose-living church members who were abusing the principle of liberty. They loved the idea of liberty from bondage to the law, but they didn't appreciate the concept of freedom from the slavery of sin.

Meanwhile, you had people recently saved out of Paganism who were fearful of eating meat offered to idols because it was a reminder to them of their life before Christ. Even though it was *lawful* for them to eat meat offered to idols, they did not understand their liberty, and their consciences were troubled about the practice. For them, if they could not eat with a pure conscience, it was a sin to eat. As Paul wrote in Romans 14:23, "Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. [And] whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." It's a sin to defile your own conscience willfully, even if your conscience is misinformed.

In 1 Corinthians 8:10-11, Paul wrote, "if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died." If you flaunt your liberty in front of someone with a weak conscience, and that person is emboldened to go against his conscience, you have harmed your brother spiritually by insisting on flaunting your liberty, instead of deferring to his weaker conscience. First Corinthians 8:12-13: "Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."

Paul was saying he would forego His liberty for the good of others. As Christians we have absolute liberty to do anything we like, as long as it does not conflict with the eternal moral principles of God. If a thing is not forbidden in Scripture, if it does not conflict with the clear moral principles God has given us, we are free to do it.

But don't use that freedom in a way that harms others. Lots of things that are legal are nonetheless not edifying. When Paul says this in verse 23, he has in mind primarily that which is edifying to others. If a thing hurts your brother rather than building him up, forego your freedom.

Now, some people misuse this verse to try to justify their own legalism. I knew a guy once who told me he had stopped watching sports because he felt it was not truly edifying. He was convinced it was something no Christian worker should ever engage in. My response was that was fine for him, and for the sake of his conscience, I would not try to coax him to watch ESPN with me, but no biblical principle requires me to adopt that guy's rule for myself when I am in the privacy of my own home. Furthermore, when I need rest and a diversion from the cares of my ministry, taking time out for a spectator sport can be truly edifying.

I explained all this to my friend, and he tried to tell me that I could edify myself even more if I would turn off the television and read more of the Puritans. Now I have no doubt that John Owen is usually more edifying than a baseball game, but even Jesus saw fit to retire from ministry with his disciples at times and get away to rest awhile. (See Mark 6:31 for an example.) I presume that those were times of real rest and relaxations, not study sessions where they read Ancient rabbinical commentaries. Rest, all by itself, or even a mindless diversion like miniature golf, can be edifying when your mind and body are in need of rest.

Now I'm one of those fortunate people who also finds a great deal of relaxation in reading the Puritans, so there are actually times when I prefer reading the Puritans over watching baseball--especially when the Cubs are getting thrashed. But it is sheer legalism to make extrabiblical rules about such things and try to impose them on others.

Paul's qualifier about things that are expedient and things that edify should not be used as an escape clause for people with a legalistic bent. Paul is simply saying that if the exercise of your liberty is hurtful to your brother, forego your liberty. "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" "Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor" (1 Corinthians 10:24). Use your liberty for the good of others. So the edification and expediency he is concerned with here is primarily the building up of others.

Now let me pause here and point out that Paul is not saying it's OK to nurture a weak conscience. He's not saying that it's wrong to instruct people with weak consciences about what is lawful and what is not. In fact, the whole point is for the *edification* of the weaker brother. Here's what he means: in the moment when you are confronted with a choice, it is right to defer to the weaker brother's scruples. But it is also right in the course of your ministry to that brother to instruct him in the truth of Scripture so that the Word of God can strengthen his conscience and build him up in that way, too.

If his conscience is emboldened by seeing you eat the meat he thinks is sinful to eat, and he eats that meat without understanding the biblical reasons why it is acceptable, then you have hurt him. You have caused him to defile his own conscience; you have caused him to sin. Paul says, don't do that.

But if he then gets instruction from Scripture, and he sees from the word of God why eating the meat is no sin at all, and his conscience is thus strengthened and enlightened by the truth of God's Word, *then* if he eats the meat, it is not a sin for him to do so. And you have actually built him up, by using the truth of God's Word to strengthen his faith.

So the point is to do what edifies. In the moment of making a choice, that may mean foregoing your freedom. Over the long haul, that means instructing the weaker brother about the truth of Christian liberty.

In fact, right here in this passage Paul himself again clearly underscores what he has taught elsewhere. There is no sin in eating meat offered to idols.

Notice verses 25-26: "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For 'the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.'" You don't *need* to have a troubled conscience about such things. In fact, you *shouldn't* have a troubled conscience about it. If you're one of those legalistic types who



fastidiously abstains from everything that's remotely related to anything questionable just to be sure you don't accidentally slip into some sin, grow up. Don't just salve yourself that you're one of those people with a tender conscience. Inform your conscience with the truth of God's Word. Educate your conscience so that you can enter into your freedom and use it the way Christ intends.

"The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." Paul is quoting the first verse of Psalm 24: "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers." Don't question every tiny thing for conscience' sake. First Timothy 4:4-5: "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer." "Titus 1:15: "To the pure, all things are pure." First Timothy 6:17: "God . . . richly provides us with everything to enjoy."

So it is wrong, and an illegitimate forfeiture of Christian liberty, to use a weak conscience to perpetuate a legalistic attitude. We are commanded in Galatians 5 to enjoy our liberty, and defend it, and not take on ourselves the yoke of any kind of bondage.

But what Paul has in mind here are young Christians, uninstructed people whose consciences have not yet had sufficient opportunity to be shaped and molded in accord with the Word of God. And he says the mature christian should defer to the weakness of the newer believer's conscience, because that is the best way to edify him.

Use your liberty for the good of others.

The second principle I see here is that you should--

## 2. USE YOUR LIBERTY FOR THE GROWTH OF THE GOSPEL

I want to skip a few verses, but I'll come back to them at the end. Look down at verses 32 and 33:

Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,  
33 just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

Paul saw an evangelistic use for Christian liberty. He believed our liberty should be employed for the growth and furtherance of the gospel.

This is in a way an extension of the first principle. You're to use your liberty for the good of others. And one of the greatest ways you can seek the good of others is to govern your behavior in a way designed to make the gospel as clear as possible to further the ministry of the gospel.

Paul said, "I do this for the spiritual profit of others, so that they may be saved." In other words, he used his liberty--or relinquished it when necessary--in order to further the expansion of the gospel.

By the way, this remark in verse 33 is simply a recapitulation of what he wrote back in chapter 9, verses 19-23:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.

21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Now what does this mean? One thing is clear: the apostle Paul was not merely looking for the favor of men. In Galatians 1:10, he wrote, "Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). He wasn't talking about adjusting the gospel message to remove the offense of the cross. He wasn't suggesting that we should preach in a way that tickles people's ears. He wasn't trying to be winsome and likable for his own ego's sake. In fact, in the last verse I just read, 1 Corinthians 9:23, he said, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel." He was interested in the growth of the gospel--not accommodating the message to the tastes of his audience, not trying to win popularity and approval as if *that* would advance the gospel. His goal was to get out of the way, so that the gospel would be clear, with the offense of the cross and the gospel's sober call to repentance perfectly intact, but with Paul, his ego, and any personal offense he might cause all taken out of the way.

Lots of people cite 1 Corinthians 9:22 ("I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some") as justification for flouting some taboo or adopting the emblems of whatever is fashionable at the moment. What Paul was saying is practically the opposite: he wasn't unnecessarily going to challenge any taboo or otherwise put himself as an obstacle between the sinner and a clear declaration of the gospel. He wanted the gospel to be heard without distraction.

He wasn't brandishing the doctrine of Christian liberty as an excuse for living a worldly lifestyle. He was talking about sacrificing his own liberty for the good of others and the growth of the gospel. He would not sacrifice the message, but he *would* sacrifice himself to win people to Christ. He would give up his liberty completely--even become "a slave to all" (v. 19)--if that would promote the spread of the gospel.

See, his desire was to win souls, and he says so several times: "that I might win more of them" (v. 19); "in order to win Jews" (v. 20); "that I might win those under the law" (end of v. 20); "that I might win those outside the law" (v. 21); "that I might win the weak"; and "that by all means I might save some" (v. 22). So winning people to Christ was his singular objective. And in order to do that, Paul was willing to give up all the rights and privileges of his liberty. He would sacrifice his position, his livelihood--and even his life, if it would further the spread of the gospel.

And so he adapted himself to the customs and preferences of others--believing that would help open a door so that he could give them the truth of the gospel. That is a right use of our liberty--for the growth of the gospel.

There's a third principle in this passage:

### 3. USE YOUR LIBERTY FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

I've been skipping around in the passage a bit, but the principles are there, even if they do not appear in the order I have given them. Use your liberty for the good of others. Use your liberty for the growth of the gospel. Now, third, use your liberty for the glory of God.

Look at verse 31: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

This is a crucial text, and to do it justice, I'd have to preach a whole series of sermons on it. Its implications are very far-reaching. This verse suggests that everything we can lawfully do may be done and *should* be done for the glory of God. Since Paul is talking in this context about food, he says "whether you eat or drink," but there's a parallel passage in Colossians 3:17 that expands this principle to cover everything. It says, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Likewise, Peter says (in 1 Peter 4:11) that the goal of everything we do is ultimately one thing: "that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

In other words, everything you can do in the name of Christ, every activity you can thank God for, you should do to the glory of God. Do it with a concern for His glory. As you give thanks, ask Him to be glorified in it. Seek his glory in everything that you do.

Now, most Christians have heard this verse often enough that they can quote it easily. The words are familiar. But have you ever thought about the sweeping extent of this command?

It's saying that every non-sinful activity of your life is an occasion to give God glory. Every breath you take, every task you perform--all of life is to be lived with a concern for God's glory above all. Parents, don't relegate the things of God to Sunday, or even a daily 5-minute family devotion. "Teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." That's Deuteronomy 6:6-9, and it's the key to glorifying God in the way you raise your children. Keep God at the forefront of your life and thoughts full time, don't try to consign Him to a fixed quiet time. *That's* legalistic.

But the extreme legalist still wants to know, "*How are you going to watch a baseball game to the glory of God?*" I can do it. Can you? If an activity itself is not sinful, then I can do it with the knowledge that God sees and approves and can use it somehow to glorify himself.

And you know what? That desire to see God glorified will improve the quality of every activity in your life. When you go to a baseball game, for example, your behavior

can be a testimony to all around you. When you engage in any activity, you can do so with the hope that whatever benefit your mind and body derive from that activity would ultimately be put to use for the glory of God--whether it's something you learn, new energy that you gain, or even strength from the exercise of walking the golf course.

Every activity of life can ultimately be used for the glory of God--especially if we're constantly looking for ways to do so.

And that is Paul's point with the Corinthians. He is urging them to get into the mindset of seeking ways to glorify God in their everyday activities.

Now, we've looked at these three right uses of our Christian liberty. We are to use our liberty for the good of others. We're to use it for the growth of the gospel. And we're to use it for the glory of God. Now I want to turn your attention to a portion of this passage that I have skipped so far.

In the middle of this passage are two short verses that contain a hypothetical case study Paul gives us about the proper way to employ our liberty--verses 27-28: "If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience."

He sets up this scenario: an unbeliever invites two believers to his house for a meal. One of the believers has a strong, biblically-informed conscience. He knows there is nothing wrong with eating meat offered to idols.

But the other believer has a weak conscience. He's fearful of eating pagan meat. His conscience will be defiled if he eats, and therefore for him to eat would be a sin.

So what does the strong believer do? He wants to glorify God, and he wants to further the gospel, but he also wants to use his liberty for the good of his own brother. What does he do?

Notice that he is in a real dilemma here. If he refuses the meat offered to him, he offends his host, the unbeliever. But if he accepts the meat, he will hurt the brother with the weaker conscience. What is a believer to do in a situation like that?

Here's Paul's advice: Offend the unbeliever. *Refuse the meat*. Instead of using your liberty in a way that will please the unbeliever and hurt your brother, sacrifice your liberty, refuse the meat, and risk offending your host.

Here's why: By showing your love to a weaker brother, you accomplish all three goals. See, love for your brother is a more powerful testimony to the unbeliever than your liberty to eat pagan meat.

Jesus said in John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." In John 17:21, He prayed that we would have unity, "so that the world may believe." Your love for your brother is a more important testimony to that unbeliever than your display of liberty.

I'm always concerned when I see Christians flaunting their liberty as if *that* were the best testimony they could show the world. Our liberty is precious. Remember the command of Galatians 5: we must carefully guard our liberty against all threats. But our

liberty is not given to us for fleshly gratification. Along with our liberty in Christ comes the responsibility to use it in a discerning way, for the good of others, for the growth of the gospel, and for the glory of God.

This brings up an interesting paradox related to our liberty in Christ. Did you notice Paul's words when I read from 1 Corinthians 9:19? Let me read that verse one more time. Paul says, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them."

That's a very good way to see our responsibility under this liberty. Though free, we're now slaves of a different sort. We're actually under a new kind of bondage: we are "servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:6). "having been freed from sin, [we] became slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:18). We are now "slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Ephesians 6:6). We have given up the yoke of the law and the bondage of sin, but we have now taken on Christ's yoke. And even though the yoke is easy and the burden is light--even though God Himself supplies the strength by which we render our service, it is nevertheless portrayed in Scripture as a kind of servitude. As willing slaves, we must voluntarily restrict our own liberty for others' sakes. Isn't that what Jesus Himself taught? "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

Now when we talk about our slavery to Christ, we're talking about the loving service of willing bondslaves. But it's a real and binding slavery. We have no personal rights that take precedence over the will of Christ and His glory.

No liberty is absolute. Everyone is enslaved to something and free from something. Romans 6 again: If you are the servant of sin, you are free from righteousness; but if you're freed from sin, you will be a servant of righteousness. There is no such thing as absolute liberty. No one is free from all duties and responsibilities. Don't ever get the idea that you freedom in Christ means you are now an autonomous moral agent under no restrictions whatsoever. We are all under obligation to Christ, to the gospel, and to one another. We are slaves to righteousness.

But we are free in the best and truest sense because we are free from our former enslavement to sin, free from the curse and condemnation of the law, and free from the frown of God. Furthermore, even our enslavement to righteousness entails a very real form of liberty, because it means we have a new desire and a new capacity to obey God and glorify Him. Slavery to Christ confers on us eternal life; whereas our former bondage to sin could only bring death.

In other words, the only true freedom in the universe is to be a slave of righteousness. We will one day understand that truth perfectly, and our freedom will finally reach full fruition in heaven, when we will at last be able to obey the will of God without any inclination to do otherwise. There is no greater freedom than that. John 8:36: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."